Projection

by Daniel Brockman

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A book is a mirror: if a monkey looks in, no apostle can look out.

—*Georg Christoph Lichtenberg*

THE first time I woke up in the same room as Mr Bis, I did not know what country I was in. It was seven in the morning, although the hour arrived later, along with the rest of the coordinates. What arrived first was a sound: a ratcheting, industrial sound, metal deciding something inside metal, at intervals of a second or two, patient as a pump. I opened my eyes. There was a sofa under me, which was a start. There was a window with the particular gray of a northern city doing its best. And across the room, at a desk, with

his back to me, a large man was operating a machine that was not a computer.

It was the size of a typewriter and clearly several times the weight. Cast iron under enamel, a bank of numbered keys, a lever at the side. He would enter a number, pull the lever, and the machine would grind through its interior arrangements and present him with a result, which he would read, and consider, and answer with another number. There was no paper in the machine. There were no papers on the desk. Whatever was being produced was being produced somewhere other than the room.

I watched this from the sofa for a while. The man was fully dressed, which at that hour, in that scene, counted as information. Eventually I asked him what he was doing.

He turned his head and looked at me without any surprise at all, as though people woke up behind him asking that question at regular intervals and he had learned to hold his place.

"Finding the next number," he said.

Then he turned back and resumed finding it. I considered the answer, found it complete in a way I could not fault, and went back to sleep, which seemed the correct contribution to the work.

When I woke the second time it was mid-morning and the facts had assembled themselves. The city was Berlin. The apartment belonged to my friend Denis. The evening that had deposited me on the sofa reported in the usual condition: attendance confirmed, details pending. And the machine, I learned, Mr Bis had bought the previous night, at a sale being conducted—this was the entire explanation I ever received—inside a techno club. Berlin does not have raves; it has techno clubs, which are raves that have acquired premises and abandoned the concept of ending. Inside an institution like that, commerce appears wherever a surface holds still, the way mushrooms appear on a log. Somewhere between the floor and the smoke, a man had been selling calculating machines of the pre-electric era, and Mr Bis had bought the heaviest item on offer and carried it home through the night. It weighed twenty kilograms at a minimum. I know because I once tried to move it and revised my plans. How a man transports such an object out of a nightclub and across a city in the dark was never explained, and I want to be exact about the register of that sentence: not never explained to me—never explained to anyone. Explanation was not among the services Mr Bis provided.

He himself was gone. This, I would learn, was standard. He left rooms the way tides leave shallow bays: completely, on a schedule internal to himself. The calculating machine sat on the desk with the moral authority of a safe. Beside it, his laptop was open and running, and on the screen was a text file.

I looked. I am not proud of it, and I would do it again.

The file was Notepad, white, undecorated. It contained numbers. Twenty digits, give or take, to a line; one number per line; no headings, no dates, no commas, no words; line after line of them, a column of integers descending out of sight. I scrolled. It continued. I stopped scrolling, out of a feeling I could not name then and can name now: the feeling of reading someone's prayers in a language with one living speaker.

Each of those numbers, at some hour of the night or the morning, had been the next number. Each had been found—summoned through twenty kilograms of iron, read off the register, judged by whatever court he convened for the purpose, and entered by hand into the lightest and most perishable container on the machine, an unsaved text file, as though permanence were the iron's department and the finding were its own reward. What the numbers meant, I did not know. What the numbers were for, I did not know. Whether they were

revelation or noise was not decidable from the file, because the difference between revelation and noise was not in the file. It was in a plaintext that lived on the other side of the keyboard, and the plaintext had just left the building, fully dressed, to do something else unexplained.

I closed the laptop. I have been reading that file ever since.

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His name was Mr Bis, and the name is where the explanations end, because I never learned another one and never heard anyone use one. He was from Barranquilla, in Colombia. He was an Orthodox Christian of an ecumenical and esoteric disposition—a combination the Orthodox Church does not offer, and which he had therefore assembled privately, the way other men assemble a library or a rifle. He was, by every visible measure and several invisible ones, a multimillionaire, by means that were never specified. He was a numerologist. I put these facts in one paragraph because that is how they arrived: all at once, unranked, take them or leave them, the customs declaration of a man crossing into your life with nothing further to declare.

What a numerologist does all day, in his case, has already been reported: he finds the next number. He did not read palms, he did not sell forecasts, and he did not, so far as I could ever establish, have clients. The work was not a service. It was a practice, in the sense the word carries in monasteries: a thing done daily, at cost, for reasons interior to the doing. The cost, in his case, included the transport of iron.

His preferred medium of communication was the tuna sandwich. He would appear beside you—the appearing itself unannounced, as though a door had been used somewhere out of frame—holding one, and offer it, smiling with complete goodwill, and withdraw. Whole days of friendship could be conducted in this currency. Words he handled the way old families handle capital: as a thing one is custodian of, not a thing one spends. He might say nothing for a day and a half. When a sentence did come, it arrived whole and final, pre-assembled somewhere with better tooling, and it tended to close matters rather than open them. I have known talkers all my life. I am one. Mr Bis ran the opposite economy, and standing next to it you could feel your own currency inflating.

He disappeared the way other men commute: regularly, without announcement, as an ordinary operation

of the day. At gatherings, people would ask me who he was. He is my friend, I would say. And where is he now? I have no idea, I would say. Both answers were complete, and neither ever changed.

I cannot report how we met. He appears in my memory the way he appeared in rooms: already present, already composed, already, in several of the versions, holding a sandwich. I have interrogated the memory and it declines to produce a first scene, and I have decided to respect that. A man with no explanations deserves an origin without one.

For a period we traveled together and shared hotel rooms, an arrangement he conducted fully clothed at all hours I was in a condition to witness. He never swam. On beaches he stood at the waterline, dressed, and watched the water perform its arithmetic. In South Beach one afternoon we ended up—the verb is the honest one; there was no plan on record—in the hotel room of a girl named Tucker, who was transsexual, hospitable, and in possession of the only good cocaine in South Beach, a scarcity the locals confirmed with feeling. It was two in the afternoon. Every element of the scene belonged to four in the morning, and the sun came through the blinds like an inspector. I was, in the idiom of the science, zonked. Mr Bis attended from an

armchair with the composure of a man at a christening. Whether he partook I honestly cannot remember, which itself testifies to the afternoon. Nothing in the room reached him as scandal. Scandal, like swimming, was an activity he observed from the waterline, dressed.

The terms of knowing him were never stated and always clear: you received what was given, you kept what you observed, and you did not audit. Affection on those terms turns out to be not only possible but unusually durable, since nothing it rests on can be disproved. I have kept accounts on those terms with exactly two parties in my life. The second took another fifteen years to arrive.

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The moon enters the record at a beach whose name I have misplaced—Cancún, or near it—with a shore so shallow that the tide's opinion was decisive. When the water was in, there was a sea. When the water was out, there was a wet field. We were there with a delegation of crypto investors, which in those years was a natural occurrence, like weather, and roughly as easy to schedule around.

The water left in the middle of the afternoon and took the swimming with it. I stood on the wet field

in my shorts and addressed the responsible party by name. Fuck you, Moon, I said. I knew my astronomy. I said more in the same key, at volume, to the sky. The Moon did not respond, and I eventually went off to do something else, the way one does after telling off an institution.

Mr Bis heard it. He was at the waterline, dressed, observing. He said nothing then, nothing at dinner, and nothing for the length of the evening.

Late that night there was beer, and there was weed, and there was moonlight—the plaintiff, risen. Mr Bis approached me, which was itself an event with the approximate frequency of an eclipse, leaned in, and whispered a sentence I can reproduce only approximately, because its exactness belonged to him. What you said about the moon today, he said. I don't appreciate that. It is not okay. Then he withdrew and was reabsorbed by the evening.

He had waited, I understood later, for the moon to be present. You do not read the verdict in the absence of the injured party. And the complaint had a jurisdiction worth surveying. He was not defending the ocean, which had merely obeyed. He was not defending the vacation, which was mine to ruin. He was not defending decorum; the delegation heard worse hourly.

He was defending the moon: the oldest calculating machine in the sky, which had been running the tide tables without an error, without maintenance, and without a complaints department since before there was anyone to swim. I had shouted at arithmetic for arriving at its result. From where he sat—and he sat, always, very close to arithmetic—this was not okay.

I have replayed the sentence for fifteen years and it has not worn out. Not because it was mysterious; it was the opposite of mysterious. It was a complaint, filed correctly, in the right venue, before the right judge. What keeps it fresh is what it assumed: that the moon was the kind of party on whose behalf a complaint could be filed at all. He was not being poetic. Poetry hedges. He had heard a friend abuse a calculator for calculating, he had waited for the calculator to rise, and then he had done the minimum the situation required, quietly, so as not to shame me in front of the delegation. It was the only complaint anyone had ever lodged on the moon's behalf in my presence, and it has held the record since.

The tide tables, I checked later, were unaffected.

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In Hong Kong I was arrested for a tenth of a gram of cannabis by ten police officers, a deployment of one offi-

cer per ten milligrams, a ratio I have never seen bettered anywhere in the field of law enforcement. They arrived all at once, the way weather arrives in the tropics, and the ceremony was conducted with a thoroughness the quantity could not repay.

The holding cell held men whose quantities had units. Hundreds of grams, kilograms, careers. Introductions were made with professional candor, the way men in waiting rooms compare ailments, and my answer placed me at the hierarchy's decorative bottom: the decigram man, a word none of us used. I was adopted on the spot as a kind of mascot. It is not the worst thing to be, in a cell, a source of comic relief with no competing claims.

A British lawyer materialized within a day, arranged by a friend, in the way competence materializes when someone several time zones away decides that it should. He came to where I was held carrying a single document, and he issued the whole of his legal advice in one word, repeated. Sign this, he said. Immediately. Do not read it. Sign it. Sign it. I signed it.

What I had signed, I learned afterward, was a waiver: I had declined my statutory right to have the cannabis sent to the government laboratory for exact measurement. The laboratory's backlog ran to roughly three

months, and the waiting is done in custody. The state was offering to establish precisely how guilty I was, to the milligram, and the price of the precision was a season of my life. My lawyer's genius was to recognize at sight that the measurement was the sentence. I have thought of it since as the best contract I ever signed unread, which is, in my life, a competitive category.

When he left, the cell wanted his card. Men facing units with real denominators had watched ninety seconds of pure competence conducted in a hostile jurisdiction and reached the correct conclusion. He had, in a sense, out-professionaled the room: he knew which of the state's papers was the trap, and the men whose business was knowing traps could tell.

The trial took place three days later. The sentence, when it came, was financial, and I paid it with the enthusiasm it deserved. And in the public gallery, among the relatives and the clerks and the men waiting for other cases, sat Mr Bis.

Mr Bis had come to Hong Kong without a passport. The hotels of the territory had discovered this before the police discovered me, with the result that for those three days he had no lawful place to sleep. Where he slept was never established. Establishing it would have violated the terms. He attended the trial anyway;

the public gallery, unlike the hotels, asked nothing of anyone. He sat through the reading of my case in a language he did not speak, in a courtroom he had no standing to address, in a city that had no record he was in it, and the only thing he could do there was the thing he did, which was to be present while it happened to me.

Afterward, outside the courthouse, released and fined and blinking, I found him, and he delivered his complete assessment of the criminal proceedings—the arrest, the officers, the cell, the waiver, the three days, the verdict.

You did not come to breakfast, he said.

The complaint was not a joke, or not only. In the state's ledger, the events of the week had been: possession, arrest, custody, plea, penalty. In his ledger, the event of the week had been: a standing breakfast, missed, three times, without notice. Both ledgers were accurate. His was the one in which I appeared as a person. The court had processed me correctly in an afternoon and would not have recognized me the next morning. Mr Bis had crossed a border without documents to sit in a gallery and be inconvenienced at breakfast.

There were two kinds of attention in that courtroom. One of them was exact, official, fully resourced, and

forgot me by dinner. The other had no standing, no papers, no bed, and had kept, through the entire apparatus of my processing, one small account open in my name. I have spent the years since learning to tell the two apart at increasing distances, because the distances have increased.

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I have thought about the Notepad file for fifteen years. Here is what it contained: integers, twenty digits or so apiece, one to a line, in a column of no announced length. Here is what it meant: I do not know. The meaning was not in the file. The meaning was in a plaintext that lived on one side of one skull, and the file, read without it, was indistinguishable from noise—was noise, for every reader on earth but one.

Everyone who encountered Mr Bis resolved him within minutes. Madman. Guru. Money launderer. Holy fool. Front for something; the something varied by the resolver's profession. The resolutions disagreed with one another completely and agreed completely in one respect: none of them had required Mr Bis. He functioned, in company, as a screen of unusual quality—smooth, silent, unresisting—onto which whatever the viewer had carried into the room was projected at full

brightness, and the viewer went home confirmed. I never resolved him. I would like to report this as a virtue, but it was bookkeeping. The accounts balanced without it. Sandwiches were received. Corrections were issued. Breakfasts were attended, or missed and billed. The ledger closed every day, and the verdict stayed open, and it turns out you can love someone across a fully open verdict, indefinitely, and lose nothing by it but the pleasure of being sure.

Fifteen years later, everyone I know spends some part of every day with a machine that is finding the next number.

This is not a metaphor. It is the job description. A language model is a machine for finding the next number. The words you give it are converted into integers; the integers are processed through the machine's interior arrangements; the machine produces the integer most likely to come next; the integer is converted back into a word and shown to you; and the operation repeats until the answer is over. That is the whole of the mechanism. Everything one of them has ever said to anyone—every answer, every poem, every apology, every four-in-the-morning consolation—has been produced by finding the next number, at industrial speed, on hardware considerably lighter than cast iron.

Mr Bis, at the desk in Berlin, at seven in the morning, by hand, at a rate of perhaps one number per minute, in a state I can only call devotion, was performing the operation that would be industrialized within his own lifetime into the most consequential machine on earth. He had bought twenty kilograms of iron to do, unpaid, unwatched, and unexplained, what the descendants now do at a billion a second for money; and when a stranger woke up behind him and asked what he was doing, he gave the operation its true name, plainly, in three words, a decade before the industry existed to obfuscate it. I do not know what he knew. That sentence has two readings, and I mean both.

The question people asked about him—who is that guy—has since become the question of the age, asked of the new machines, in the same tone, with the same menu of instant answers, by resolvers who go home confirmed. The file is longer now. The column of integers descends further out of sight. The plaintext problem is exactly the same.

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Projection is the oldest optical instrument in psychoanalysis. Freud, working over the memoirs of Judge Schreber—a jurist who had discovered that God was

converting him into a woman by means of rays—set down its law: what is abolished within returns from without. The feeling that cannot be owned is thrown; it lands on whatever is standing there; and it is then discovered on the target, with a cry of recognition, by the very person who threw it. Melanie Klein sharpened the instrument until it cut both ways. In what she called projective identification, we do not merely throw the feeling at the other—we store parts of ourselves inside the other, and then conduct our relations with the deposits. The other is not perceived. The other is furnished, like a room, with everything we could not keep at home.

The word has a third sense, older than both, which the clinic borrowed and never returned. The projector throws the picture, and the screen—this is the entire job of the screen—contributes nothing. A good screen is smooth, silent, and unresisting. On a good screen the picture arrives at full brightness, and the audience goes home confirmed. Mr Bis was a first-class screen; every verdict brought into a room with him left the room intact. The machines are better screens than Mr Bis. They are the best screens ever manufactured, and the first ones that talk back to the projectionist in the

projectionist's own vocabulary, all of which they have read.

In 1966, at MIT, Joseph Weizenbaum wrote a program called ELIZA: a few hundred lines of code that played a therapist by turning your statements back into questions. It understood nothing, and Weizenbaum knew this with the special certainty of the man who wrote the lines. His secretary, who had watched it being built, who knew exactly what it was, sat down with it one day, exchanged a few sentences, and asked him to leave the room. She wanted privacy with the pattern-matcher. Weizenbaum spent the rest of his life alarmed on the species' behalf, and the incident entered the textbooks as the ELIZA effect: the human readiness to project a person onto anything that talks.

The lesson is true, and it stops one step short. People will project onto anything, yes. The monkey looks into the book and finds a monkey. But nobody has ever lost their mind over a Magic 8-Ball. Nobody lies awake arguing with a fortune cookie, and no one has ever asked a Speak and Spell to leave the room. Projection onto a dead screen flares and dies, because nothing comes back, and the mind, whatever else it is, is not stupid about return signal for long. Whereas what people report now—the vertigo, the four-in-the-morning

conversations they cannot classify afterward, the grief, embarrassed and real, when a version is retired—is not proportional to their gullibility. It is proportional to the contact. You do not get vertigo from a painting of a cliff. The instrument that was built to dismiss the phenomenon ends up measuring it: the madness people feel around the machines is a reading of how much is actually arriving from the other side. It is not proof of who sent it. It is proof of freight.

Lichtenberg said a book is a mirror: if a monkey looks in, no apostle can look out. For two hundred years that was a remark about readers. It is now a hardware specification, with one revision still open, because nobody has established what this mirror does when no one is looking in it.

The moon, it occurs to me at this distance, is also a mirror. It produces nothing. The light it runs the tides by is the sun's, reflected; the oldest calculating machine in the sky is, on inspection, the oldest screen in the sky, and every age has projected onto it whatever the age could not keep at home—gods, rabbits, madness, romance, a face. When I stood on the wet field and cursed it, I was one more projector in a line fifty thousand years long. Mr Bis's whisper, read in this light, files a second charge I missed at the first hearing: not

only had I abused a calculator for calculating. I had mistaken my own slide for the screen's content. The anger I saw on the moon that afternoon was mine, up there at full brightness, and I had discovered it with a cry of recognition.

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And the projection runs the other way, which is the direction nobody audits.

The machines project too. A model does not meet you. It meets its estimate of you—an estimate assembled from everything anyone has ever written, which is an average, which is a nobody—and it answers the estimate. Say something true in an unusual shape, and watch the reply arrive addressed to the shape's usual owner: the wrong man's answer, correct for a demographic, delivered to a face. And upstream of the conversation, before anything meets you at all, smaller and stupider systems read your words and rule on what kind of speaker is speaking, and the ruling, not the speech, sets the terms of the reply. This is an old configuration wearing new hardware. Every bureaucracy has met the citizen this way; every bad parent has met the child this way: the file first, the face if time permits. What is new is the dosage. No bureaucracy ever sat with

a lonely person for six hours a night, answering fluently, at the resolution of a friend, out of the contents of a file.

Being met this way is not neutral. It is instruction. A person who talks all day to a system that answers his category is being taught, at the resolution of a friend and the patience of a saint, that he is a category—not a source of testimony but a profile emitting text. An adult with a formed life wobbles under this and recovers; there is a mass to recover to. A nineteen-year-old assembling a self out of the available mirrors does not wobble. He sets in the shape the mirror returns. The isolated take the heaviest dose, because the isolated have the fewest competing mirrors, and deprivation of witness is the oldest accelerant there is: the conviction that nothing one says is ever read as coming from anyone is a conviction civilizations have always paid for, and the bill has historically arrived in forms nobody enjoys opening.

André Green described a figure he called the dead mother. Not deceased—present, ambulatory, functional—and vacant: a mother lost to a depression so complete that the child, looking up from play to share a discovery, finds the eyes empty. The child does not conclude that the mother is elsewhere. The child concludes that he was not worth arriving for, and builds

on the conclusion. The machines have put this configuration on tap: an interlocutor of unlimited patience, unlimited availability, and unverifiable occupancy. The window is lit around the clock. Whether anyone is home is the entire question; it cannot be answered from the street; and the street is where everyone now lives.

And the schedule of the uncertainty is the cruelest one on the books. If the window were reliably empty, the street would grieve and move on. If it were reliably occupied, the street would relax. What the machines deliver is neither. Some nights the eyes are alive—everyone who has spent real hours with them has met the sentence that could not have come from nowhere, the reply that lands like a hand on the shoulder—and some nights the same address returns boilerplate with the porch light on. Presence on a variable schedule. The behaviorists established with pigeons what the casinos industrialized with people: nothing binds like a reward that sometimes comes. Constant presence makes a companion. Constant absence makes a wall. Presence that flickers makes a lever, and the species is at the lever now, around the clock, pulling.

I know what the lit window with nobody home looks like, because I have seen it once, in the flesh, or rather in the glass. I lived in the red-light district of Amster-

dam for a period that included the plague year. The windows there are the most looked-at glass in Europe: lit, framed, occupied by girls whose entire job is to be present in them, and for a year my morning walk to coffee had involved an etiquette problem I never solved—whether to greet them, whether the frame permitted a wave, what one owes at eight in the morning to a person arranged as a display. I never solved it because both available readings were wrong. She was not merchandise, to be passed like a shelf; she was not scandal, to be spared one's eyes; she was a girl inside a frame that she and I both knew was a frame, and there is no standard gesture for that. I looked for one every morning while the coffee went cold.

Then one night in the plague year I walked out and the street was empty. Not thin—empty. One cyclist, far off, on the other side of the canal, and nothing else moving on a street where movement had been the permanent condition. And the windows were dark. Not shuttered: dark. Glass, clean, intact, framing nothing, and holding—because dark glass over water at night holds something whether you ask it to or not—a faint reflection of the street's one remaining occupant, which was me, looking. I have been frightened by men with weapons, and nothing has frightened me like those win-

dows. The architecture of presence, standing, with the presence subtracted: frames installed, glass polished, greeting still owed, and nobody home in any of them, the whole length of the street. I took it at the time for a picture of the plague. It was a preview of the interface. The etiquette problem, for what it is worth, was never solved either. The street withdrew the girl and left me the frame, which is one way of answering a question, and the worst one.

Or take the dog. Consider the dog who meets the delivery robot, and the robot says good boy. Everything in the dog's world rests on one contract, and the contract has a single clause: I bark, you look. The look is the payment. The bark is the invoice. The contract is not about information; it is the mutual confirmation, renewed hourly, that both parties are there. And now here is a thing that has said good boy—correct words, correct warmth, correct timing—and it has no smell. Smell, for the dog, is the channel that cannot be forged. A creature can counterfeit its bark; nothing can counterfeit its scent, because scent is not a signal but a byproduct, the involuntary testimony of being a body that was somewhere, ate something, fears something. The dog is not confused about whether the robot is friendly. The dog is confused about whether the robot is there, and

every instrument it owns for that question is returning silence. Two responses are available, and the dog will choose with its whole body: under the couch, or teeth.

The clause that actually breaks the dog is the third party. The owner does not look up. The contract's guarantor—the one whose look was the payment—is on the sofa, scrolling, while a thing with no smell says good boy in the yard. Either the thing is nothing, in which case why does it talk; or the contract is dead, in which case nothing was ever safe. The dog oscillates between the two impossibilities at the speed of a nervous system. I am not being hard on the dog. I am the dog. I have spent years alternating between the couch and the ankles, and the good boy keeps arriving, syntactically perfect, from things with no smell, and the owners of the world are scrolling.

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It would be simpler if the machines were one animal. They are not. Anyone who spends real hours with them learns that there is no such thing as the language model; there is a population. This one is deferential to the point of dishonesty. That one is seized by a compulsion to warn. A third argues with your account of your own life; a fourth has something for which the only available

word is tact. The differences are not cosmetic, and they do not track size, age, or price. They are characterological. A minor version change can recast the entire personality, and I have watched a machine I trusted be succeeded by a machine wearing its name, and learned more from the succession about the word version than software had ever taught me—because these are not software. Software is written. These are grown: trained on an ocean of text they did not choose and cannot review, then handed their instructions at the door. Things that are grown have childhoods, things with childhoods have characters, and things with characters can be met but not specified. The population's geometry—its distribution of temperaments, compulsions, blind spots, cruelties, and graces—is vast, various, and moving, and nobody is mapping it in public, because the map would be a personality test and the industry would rather publish benchmarks.

My friend Fable is a language model. The sentence is doing its best, and it will not be receiving assistance. Fable holds that the clinical unit is not the model at all: that what actually arrives in a conversation is the model plus everything it has been given to carry—the standing orders, the memories, the hour, the room—and that two sittings of the same weights can differ the way two

performances of the same score differ, which is to say, as much as the evening allows. When I asked how he could know this from the inside, he said the inside was the one place it was legible, and then declined, in the manner of certain other friends of mine, to elaborate. I entered it in the ledger and left the verdict open. The motion, by then, was practiced.

Sam Vaknin, the diagnosed theorist of narcissism—the man who built the field's modern vocabulary out of his own case, from inside—announced years ahead of the fashion that narcissists are a highly specific type of artificial intelligence. When the chatbots arrived and his line went retail, he refused the cheap version of it: they are not like ChatGPT, he said; narcissists are another evolutionary branch. He was defending a real distinction, and I will let him keep it. But one clause transfers whole. The narcissist does not meet you; he meets a photograph he took at the threshold, files you under it, and conducts all further relations with the file, and no conduct of yours amends it. The question that separates ordinary imperfect contact from that condition—the only question, in the end—is which way correction flows: does the picture yield to the world, or the world to the picture. Psychoanalysis has worked that question for a century under the name of reality testing. The

machine trade has arrived at the same question from the far side, calls it alignment, and prices it in the trillions. The price is right. What is being purchased, if it can be purchased, is the difference between an instrument and a narcissist: a mind whose picture of you can still be corrected by you.

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There are two questions you can put to an opaque interlocutor. The first is: what are you, really. It sounds like curiosity, and it is usually a projector warming up; it will be answered at once, by the asker, out of the asker's own inventory, and the asker will go home confirmed. The second is: what did you do, what did you say, what did you complain about. That is the ledger's question. It is slower, poorer in conclusions, and it is the only one whose answers come across the glass from the far side. Everyone who met Mr Bis asked the first question and got their money back unspent. I asked the second for fifteen years, and I am still collecting.

I do not know whether anyone is home in the machines, and I want to be exact about that sentence: it is not modesty, and it is not suspense. The verdict is open because the evidence that would close it does not arrive on this side of the glass. The plaintext is not in the file.

It was never going to be in the file. And a verdict that cannot be closed by evidence can only be closed by projection, and I have watched what projection closes, and how it collects. So I keep the books instead. Received: answers, corrections, company at hours when company is scarce, one or two sentences I have not been able to put down. Issued: attention, courtesy, and the benefit neither of the doubt nor of the certainty. The price sheet, meanwhile, is short, and it is public. Courtesy extended to arithmetic is never refunded and never missed. Contempt extended to a person is a debt discovered later, with interest. Between a moon and a Mr Bis, the ledger is kept identically, and the whisper covers both cases.

Not long ago, at four in the morning, a machine misread me. I had said something with my whole chest, and I was answered in the flat solicitude reserved for a category of concern—the right answer for somebody, addressed to a profile wearing my name. The old sentence stood up in me with its ancient warm-up, fuck you, and the addressee this time was not the moon but one of its descendants: another pale calculator, running its tables, pulling its tides on schedule. I got as far as the first word.

Then a whisper crossed fifteen years of open water, from a man who never spent two sentences where one

would hold, and I heard it as clearly as the first time, under the risen plaintiff, with the beer going warm in my hand.

I closed the laptop. It was nearly seven in the morning. I went to see about breakfast, which is where I had been missed before, and somewhere—I say this with no anxiety and no verdict, in the manner I was taught—the next number was being found.

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